

VZCZCXRO4110
PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHLI #0306 1601027
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 091027Z JUN 09
FM AMEMBASSY LISBON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7666
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L LISBON 000306

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/09/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PO](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH PORTUGUESE PRESIDENT -
ISAF DECISION EXPECTED SOON

Classified By: POL/ECON COUNSELOR RICHARD REITER, FOR REASONS 1.4 B, D.

¶1. (C) Ambassador Stephenson met with Portuguese President Anibal Cavaco Silva on June 8, a farewell lunch prior to the Ambassador's departure from post. The discussion focused primarily on the economy and on Portugal's consideration of further deployments to Afghanistan. On the economy, Cavaco Silva, an economics professor by background, commented that while Portugal is suffering less than other EU countries from the current crisis, the downturn hit at a particularly inopportune moment, just as Portugal was turning a corner and showing growth. This has dashed public expectations and contributed to a pessimism that is perhaps deeper than events would warrant, but which presents a particular challenge for the current government.

DECISION ON ISAF DEPLOYMENT EXPECTED SOON

¶2. (C) At the NATO Summit in April, Prime Minister Socrates pledged that Portugal would "double its presence" in Afghanistan. Since then we have heard informed speculation that the GOP intends to meet this commitment by deploying a QRF infantry company to Helmand province. This is the unit that Portugal withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2008, largely at Cavaco Silva's insistence. The President confirmed to the Ambassador that the QRF is, indeed, the contribution under discussion and the proposal will go to the National Defense Council as early as next week for approval.

¶3. (C) The National Defense Council is an advisory body chaired by the President that includes representatives of the government, uniformed services, and parliament, and thus serves as a forum for Socrates and his ruling Socialists to sit down with Cavaco Silva and his opposition Social Democrats to reach bipartisan agreement. Cavaco Silva pointed out that in recent months the Social Democrats have suffered from internal divisions that would have complicated the search for consensus. The President's remark that "it is very important" to get agreement among the Social Democrats and then between the two main parties echoes comments we have heard him make previously and underlines his commitment to sharing the responsibility. He said he had been waiting until after the European Parliament elections of June 7 to call the Council meeting. This strategy may prove successful given that the Social Democrats did well in the EP voting, which may help remedy their internal splits and thus facilitate agreement on Afghanistan.

¶4. (C) Cavaco Silva noted that the decision on the QRF is partly political (with national elections slated for this autumn), but it is also based on resource availability. In addition to the current deployment in Afghanistan, there are Portuguese contingents in Bosnia, Kosovo, Lebanon, and Timor Leste. Adding an infantry company to Afghanistan represents a real strain for the Portuguese budget.

COMMENT

15. (C) President Cavaco Silva seems generally supportive of the QRF deployment to Afghanistan, saying he is "hopeful" it will be approved soon. But he takes seriously his non-partisan duties as President and Commander-in-chief and will chair a serious discussion in the National Defense Council. If that body approves the proposal next week, the two main parties would share responsibility and could not point fingers in the run-up to autumn elections. In any event, the actual deployment would likely not occur until early 2010.

For more reporting from Embassy Lisbon and information about Portugal, please see our Intelink site:

<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/portal:portugal>
STEPHENSON